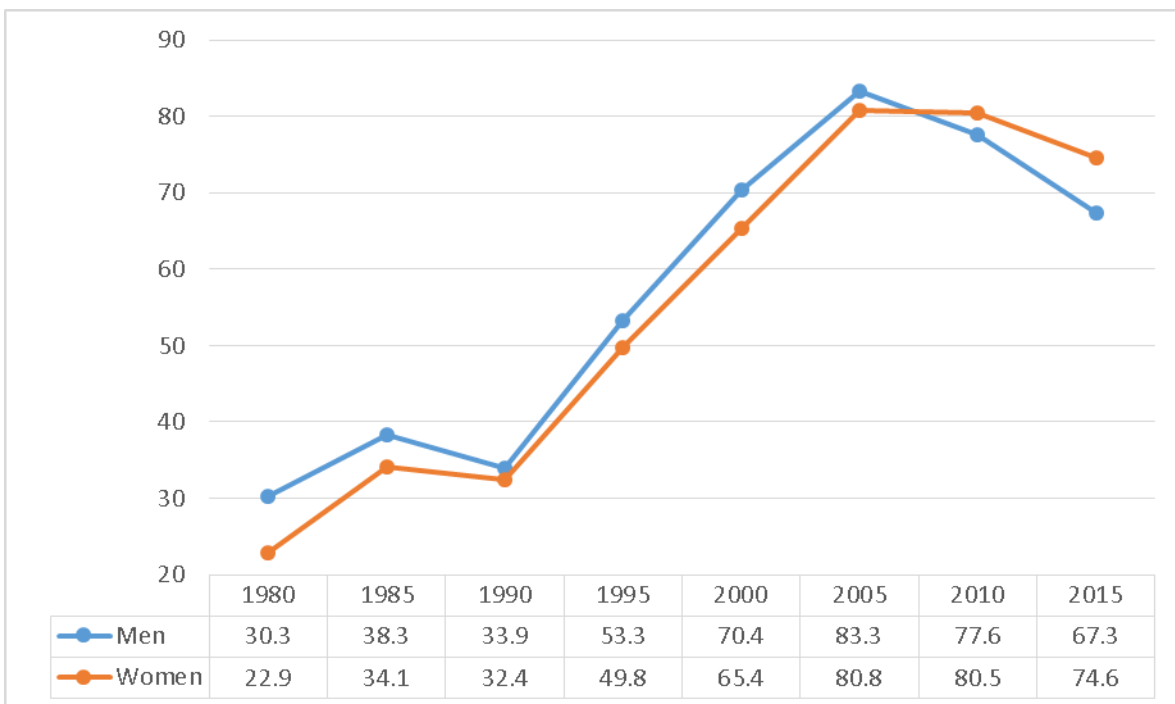


### What Does It Mean to Become An Adult?: When Everyone Else Goes to College: The Work-Bound Youth in Korea *By Hyejeong Jo*

What does it mean becoming a labor worker to the Korean Millennials when everyone else goes to college? The recent trends of college advance rates show that college has recently become a rite-of-passage for the majority of young Koreans. Seven out of ten high school graduates now choose to go to college, and this trend has been more pronounced among recent female cohorts (Figure 1). Nevertheless, there still exist a substantial number of the work-bound youth - young adults who join the labor force with only high school education. Moreover, with the economic shift, they likely find their transition to work precarious. Then, how do the work-bound youth make sense of their transition and their social status?

**Figure 1. College Advance Rate by Gender, 1985-2015**



Notes: College Advance Rate = (The number of students who proceed to college on high school graduation / The number of high school graduates) X 100. Source: Educational Statistics Analysis Report (2015). Department of Education, Korean Educational Development Institute. <http://kess.kedi.re.kr/index>.

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Based on the interviews with 27 Korean young men and women (aged 18-23) in the low-paying service and manufacture industry, Jo's study examines how the work-bound youth narrate and interpret their transitions to work. This study shows that male and female workers forge perceptions of their transitions and make predictions of future trajectories in starkly different ways. Female respondents worry that their transition to becoming an independent adult might not end successfully. In contrast, male respondents are less concerned about their current work or their future status. Although both think that their current work "has no future," male interviewees believe that they still have a chance to achieve a better future.

These differing narratives between men and women are mainly derived from their perspectives of major institutions shaping their transitions - college and military service. Female respondents feel insecure about their social status as they see college education as a precondition for a self-sufficient and respectable adult in Korea. They think of it as a source of both human and cultural capital. They feel that they are less advantageous in the labor market, which might make them get trapped in current work. They are also anxious that their cultural "inferiority" from their lack of college education would keep them from earning much social respect. Finally, as a 22-year-old convenient store cashier, Su-ji worries, they are concerned about their status in the future marriage market because men would "prefer a woman with a college degree" who would likely become a productive wife and capable mother.

Unlike female respondents, male interviewees do not believe in college education. Instead, they think that the two-year military service - which is required for every Korean man - is a pivotal institution for their future. To them, completing the military obligation is the prerequisite for earning social respect as a male adult. As a 20-year-old restaurant server, Nam-il says, the military service can convince others that they are "a man without a problem, a normal man." They also believe that their future fulfillment of the military service will prove them as a capable male worker suitable for industrial occupations (e.g., construction workers), which helps them to become a responsible breadwinner. Overall, male interviewees remain optimistic about themselves and their future because the military service will turn them into a better human being or "a real man (jin-jja nam-ja)" with psychological maturity and financial capability.

These gendered narratives show that female work-bound youth feel more burdened in Korean society where college education has become a social norm for young people. Considering college education to be a crucial institution for their transition, female workers are anxious about their status as a worker, personhood, and womanhood. On the contrary, as male work-bound youth accept the military service as a symbolic token of a respectable man, they dream of a better self and the brighter future even without college education.

More information about this study can be found here.

#### References:

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